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Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee

MRS. CURLIE (C.E.) MCGRUDER



Photograph courtesy of the author

Mrs. Curlie E. McGruder served in a variety of capacities during her adulthood. She was an educator, pianist, coach, and mother. However, Nashvillians will best remember her for her endeavors and resilience as a civil and social activist.

Curlie E. Haslip was born to Troy E. and Bessie Haslip on November 11, 1927, in Fairfield, Alabama. She received her elementary education from the Jefferson County School System and completed her secondary education at Selma University Prep High School. After completion of her formative education, Haslip moved to Knoxville, Tennessee, where she received her undergraduate degree from Knoxville College. While there, she was Miss Knoxville College and pledged the Pi Zeta Chapter of Zeta Phi Beta sorority. After completing her undergraduate studies, Haslip returned to Alabama, where she taught and coached the girls' basketball team at Clay County Training School.

In 1952, Curlie Haslip married Charles E. McGruder, thereby retaining her initials, which later became her trademark. In 1954, the McGruders moved from Toledo, Ohio, to Nashville, Tennessee, so he could complete his residency at Meharry Medical College. In a short period, Curlie McGruder gave birth to two sons. Later, she attended Fisk University for graduate studies in sociology. She was more committed to her family and her involvement in community organizations, however, and she did not complete her master's degree.

Much of Mrs. C.E. McGruder's community service involved activities with the Nashville chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). From the 1960s, McGruder held many different positions in the local chapter, including President (1964-65), Youth Director, Public Relations, and Life-time Board Member. In 1964, she was instrumental in organizing a march for freedom around Nashville. During the

march, white police were instructed to pick up all organizers. Some march organizers, including McGruder, hid in a car near Fisk University's campus and continued to instruct and encourage students with techniques to carry out a successful march. This was only one of many marches that McGruder organized throughout the 1960s. Others included a silent march to protest the bombing of Birmingham's Sixteenth Avenue Baptist Church, where four little girls died. As a result, the Nashville chapter of the NAACP drafted a letter to President Kennedy requesting more federal troops be dispatched to Birmingham to protect citizens of color. Another important march involved a demand for a public accommodations ordinance. That effort included civil rights activist John Lewis, national chairman of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Mrs. McGruder organized this march in her capacity as President of the local chapter of the NAACP along with SNCC and local churches and ministers. Activities such as these brought McGruder an abundance of criticism and rejection among both blacks and whites, but she forged ahead in her quest to secure equal rights for people of color. Because of her efforts in the 1960s as Local and State Youth Director and Second Vice President for the State of Tennessee, the National Youth Council and College Division of the NAACP gave McGruder an award of appreciation.

After the turbulent 1960s, McGruder continued her efforts to bring about better communities and racial, social and economic equality. During the 1970s, she joined the ranks of the Davidson County Independent Council and retained her position(s) with the local chapter of the Young Adult Chapter of the NAACP. McGruder focused much of her attention on enfranchising more people of color in Nashville. With the help of local ministers such as the Revs. Dogan Williams and Amos Jones and college students from the local black colleges and universities, hundreds of black Nashvillians, who otherwise would not have registered

to vote, were given that opportunity. She focused on voting issues in Nashville and other urban and rural areas. To assist in bringing down the walls of racial injustice beyond Nashville, college students under McGruder's direction organized numerous fundraisers to facilitate their travels to Clarksville, Murfreesboro, Louisiana, and Mississippi. She also joined forces with comrade Joe Kelso to seek federal and local funds for the restoration of the Fort Negley project. McGruder continued to receive accolades in the 1970s, including Dedication and Outstanding Leadership (WVOL radio); Outstanding Service Award, Youth Adviser of the National Youth Work Committee NAACP (61st National Convention), Certificate of Appreciation for community and public service (Governor Ray Blanton), and Invaluable Contribution to the Civil Rights Struggle (NAACP Youth Council).

In her later years, McGruder continued to work feverishly for any cause that benefited the black community, even if that included shaking up Metropolitan and state government. The omnipresent crusader continued to march in response to issues that affected Nashville. She marched against issues such as apartheid, lack of employment for blacks, and the lack of minorities in political positions, and pushed for a national holiday to honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Although McGruder ran unsuccessfully for city council, she continued to endorse and support others. Among her greatest achievements in the 1980s was the establishment of an annual citywide march and breakfast held every January in honor of Dr. King. During the 1980s and 1990s, Mrs. C.E. McGruder received numerous awards and accolades for her dedication to the Nashville community. They included: Social Action Award (Eta Beta Sigma Chapter of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity Inc.),

Honorary Registrars-at-Large in recognition of Outstanding Service to the Nashville Committee (Davidson County Election Commission), Appreciation of Devoted Service and Invaluable Service to the David B. Todd, Jr. Foundation, an Appreciation Award for Dedicated Service, Davidson County Independent Council (DCIPC), and the Freedom Fighters Plaque for Community Service (NAACP).

In the early 1990s, as the struggle continued for racial and social equality, McGruder's health began to wane. Despite poor health she remained dedicated to community service, and it was the masses and college students that were most receptive of her actions. According to Dr. Charles E. McGruder, "If someone called at 2 am from East Nashville and needed assistance, and Curlie was in North Nashville, she would tell them to send a car and she would be there for the cause." She was outspoken and often a thorn in the side of her opposition.

On the evening of December 17, 1993, McGruder attended her last board meeting of the NAACP. In a matter of hours after the meeting was adjourned, Mrs. C.E. McGruder was forever silenced. In death, as in life, She continued to receive recognition of outstanding proportions. The annual Martin Luther King Birthday Breakfast, which was created to bring community leaders together at Jefferson Street Missionary Baptist Church, was renamed the C.E. McGruder Celebration Breakfast. But her greatest honor came in 2003, when the Metropolitan School Board, with the encouragement of school board member Edward Kendall, renamed the abandoned John Early Elementary school the C.E. McGruder Family Resource Center.

--Pamela Lane-Bobo
